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Best of 2008: East Bay dining

By Chrissa Ventrelle
Contra Costa Times Correspondent

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The East Bay's best new restaurants of 2008 knew what we were craving before we did — rustic, authentic flavors in a low-key setting. Even before the economic implosion, our crew of restaurant reviewers independently gravitated toward comfortable spots with ingredient-driven, clearly conceptualized dishes.

It was a fine year for pasta lovers as four Italian eateries — Corso, Acquacotta, Fiore and Bellanico — made our list of top new spots.

In 2008, "rustic" and "authentic" were the regional buzzwords, dethroning the triumvirate of "seasonal," "local," and "organic" from their multiyear reign. Apparently, we have grown tired of these terms, forcing restaurateurs to stretch for new words to convey the same message of quality and freshness.

The sleek, flamboyant and fussy didn't fare so well. This was not the time for shocking ingredients that require asphyxiation waivers or physics-defying platings. Design was intentionally simple with dark,

recycled wood furniture and muted walls nearly stripped of art (one noteworthy exception was Miss Pearl's Jam House, where the whimsical Caribbean décor is a draw in itself).

Two aspects of dining that were notably absent this year were "inside voices" and doggy bags. An affinity for hard surfaces, communal tables and open spaces are making restaurants exceedingly noisy. Portion sizes, meanwhile, have hit an all-time low, rendering leftovers a kitschy relic of generations past.

What's most exciting about this year's list of top new East Bay restaurants is that nearly all are owned by well-respected chefs who have deliberately chosen to open their first or second restaurant on this side of the bay. It's a wonderful validation that the East Bay dining scene is growing in legitimacy and confidence.

Here are the best restaurants that opened in the East Bay's in 2008, in alphabetical order:

Acquacotta: This smart Italian restaurant which fills a void in Alameda's quiet Webster Street neighborhood is the baby of chef John Coucaud, who cut his teeth at Oliveto and Prima. Acquacotta offers a daily changing menu, featuring trattoria fare such as insalata tricolore and pan roasted duck. Reviewer and former food editor Nicholas Boer gave the 36-seat restaurant high marks, noting, "When the chef and owner are one and the same, it's a very good sign." 1544 Webster St., Alameda, 510-523-2220, www.acquacotta.net.

Bellanico: What started as a quiet neighborhood restaurant in Oakland's Glenview neighborhood quickly emerged as an East Bay darling. Chris Shepherd, who also owns Aperto in San Francisco, imports rustic Italian flavors at prices reasonable enough for weekly visits. The most popular menu items stretch beyond Americanized trattoria fare,

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such as Swiss chard Malfati (dumplings) with sage and butter or tagliolini pepati with smoked bacon, hot peppers and arugula. 4238 Park Blvd., Oakland, 510-336-1180, www.bellanico.net .

Brown Sugar Kitchen: Reviewer John Birdsall wrote, "The cornmeal waffle and buttermilk fried chicken is simply the best version of the Harlem classic you're likely to taste." This West Oakland diner is the pride of owner Tanya Holland, a serious chef with cookbook credits and Food Network appearances. It's open for breakfast and lunch only. 2534 Mandela Parkway, Oakland, 510-839-7685, www.brownsugarkitchen.com .

Camino: My most memorable East Bay meal of the year was a weeknight dinner at Oakland's Camino, with a seat near the open kitchen and cooking hearth. Longtime Chez Panisse Chef Russell Moore transformed the humble black-eyed pea into a legume legend paired with bitter rapini. A perfect slice of oiled toast topped with creamy avocado was a lesson in simplicity. Moore's very limited menu and fireplace cooking isn't for everyone, but his dedication to his craft makes it worth a journey. 3917 Grand Ave., Oakland. 510-547-5035, www.caminorestaurant.com .

Chevalier: Provençal-inspired dishes found their way to Lafayette last summer, thanks to French chef Philippe Chevalier, who first impressed the East Bay as head chef at Danville's La Salamandre. Spring for the succulent Colorado lamb sirloin roasted with a cranberry bean, tomato and hot chorizo ragout. The dining room is tiny, but the outside patio is lovely, complete with twinkling lights. 960 Moraga Rd., Lafayette, 925-385-0793, www.chevalierrestaurant.com .

Chow: This bustling Danville hangout from Tony Guilisano has mass appeal and works particularly well for families. A cousin to the Chow in Lafayette

(Guilisano also owns two Chows in San Francisco), it's designed with an "old Danville" feel as a sort of rustic barn with a long bar, and serves solid American comfort fare at generally fair prices. The burger royale is always a good bet. Plus, it's open late night, a rare find in the 925. 445 Railroad Ave., Danville, 925-838-4510, www.chowfoodbar.com .

Esin: The move from San Ramon to elegant new digs in Danville brought renewed interest in the cooking of husband and wife Curtis and Esin DeCarion. The American and Mediterranean menu showcases many delicious savory choices, but desserts such as a black bottom white chocolate banana crème tart keep the sweet-toothed customers particularly loyal. 750 Camino Ramon, Danville, 925-314-0974, www.esinrestaurant.com .

Fiore: This cozy Italian fusion restaurant brings vitality to Concord's Kmart shopping center. The grilled halibut is a real winner, although young chef owner Habib Jacifi says risotto pescatore is his standout dish. For a little romance, brave the semiprivate "red room" where Jacifi tries to seat first dates. 5100 Clayton Rd., #A14, Concord, 925-969-1887.

Mahalo Grille: Pleasanton's Mahalo Grille is riding a new wave of interest with new owners and a new chef. The tropical fusion menu with Hawaiian influences allows executive chef Josh Payton the freedom to serve dishes ranging from ahi tuna poke to Argentina hangar steak. For reviewer Ann Tatko-Peterson, the crab-stuffed mahi-mahi was a highlight: "This dish proves there is no such thing as seafood overload." Insiders, she says, know to ask for a side of their delicious apricot sauce. 425 Main St., Pleasanton, 925-462-2800, www.mahalogrille.com .

Miss Pearl's Jam House: This expansive Caribbean style restaurant energizes Oakland's Jack London

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Square. Staged as fictitious Miss Pearl's eclectic seaside mansion, this Joie de Vivre restaurant peddles a broad "new world" menu, with island fare ranging from moist jerk chicken to stone oven baked clams. The bay views are top notch, as are the chile and lime spiced sweet potato fries. 1 Broadway, Oakland, 510-444-7171. www.misspearlsjamhouse.com.

Trattoria Corso: Roscoe Skipper and Wendy Brucker, chef at Rivoli Restaurant and the East Bay's likely top female chef, introduced this casual Florentine trattoria to Berkeley's Shattuck Avenue last summer. "The goal of old-school authenticity is what sets Corso apart from so many Italian eateries," said reviewer Kathryn Jessup. "Not to be missed is the sugo, a beef and pork ragu that takes hours to make. Come summer, the simple caprese salad is the best I've found." 1788 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, 510-704-8004, www.trattoriacorso.com.

Yankee Pier: Yankee Pier offers Contra Costa residents a new spot to stretch their sea legs over East Coast fare. With fresh shucked oysters, lobster rolls and clam chowder, this place oozes Cape Cod. Nicholas Boer noted that the fish and chips are a must. Kudos to Lark Creek Restaurant Group for importing another quality restaurant to the 'burbs. 3593 Mount Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, 925-283-4100, www.yankeepier.com.

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